

## Andre Norton

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The sluggish tide of automobiles surges from one stoplight to the next, through a landscape of giant signs: Pizza Hut, Burger King, Hungry Man Restaurant, Puppies and Guppies, Pantry Pride, Kentucky Fried Chicken, International House of Pancakes, Bicycle Castle, Bob's Pool Service, Majik Market, McDonald's, Wendy's Hamburger, The Sun Bank (Open 24 Hours), Denny's, the Fill-em-Fast gas station, Sundance Apartments ("If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home By Now!"). . . .

It's a concrete wasteland encircling Orlando, Florida, and it seems endless. But after ten miles or so, I reach Winter Park, a quiet, small town embedded in the suburban sprawl. The buildings are older here, and the scale is more appropriate to people than to automobiles. In fact, some citizens have actually shed their cars and are strolling down the sidewalks. A lawn sprinkler spreads rainbows; lizards bask in the sun; pastel pink, blue, and green ranch-style houses stand dappled in shade from oak trees, maples, palms, firs, and exotic frondy Florida trees that are strange to me. Andre Norton's house is on this street.

Once, long ago, she was Alice Norton. But when she started selling stories in the 1930s, it simply Wasn't Done for a woman to write fast-paced action-adventure, and so she chose Andre as a suitably ambiguous pseudonym.

She's a gray-haired, rather reserved lady in her late sixties. She very

seldom gives interviews; she values her privacy, never travels, and never allows photographs, either, because they would conflict with the image she projects in her novels. As she greets me at her front door and politely invites me in, I suddenly feel as if I'm visiting my aunt.

Her living room is large and shadowy. There are endless shelves of ornaments and pictures and miniatures, and everything is scrupulously neat and tidy. She has already decided who should sit where; she directs me to the couch and settles herself into a well-preserved straight-backed arm chair, facing me. Two cats come wandering across and sniff me as I set up the microphone. Another cat sits on the dining table, looking inscrutable. Two more are lurking in other parts of the room, and another two are outside in a big cage that has been improvised at the back of the house, to allow the felines to enjoy the Florida sun without danger from traffic on the street.

Since I imagine that Andre Norton might be unaccustomed to talking about herself to a stranger, I begin by asking her about the simple facts of her career.

"I've been writing since 1934," she tells me. "I'll have ninety-eight books published by the end of this year. In addition, I have done seven anthologies, and have collaborated on six books with other people.

"I wrote my first book in high school, but I didn't sell it. I sold my second book, when I was twenty-one. Then I went back and rewrote the first one, and sold that too.

"I always enjoyed science fiction, reading Wells, Verne, Merritt, and some of the other pioneers. But when I began writing, there was no market in America for book-length science fiction. It was strictly a short-story form, and I find it very hard to write short stories. I've only done about twelve in my whole career.

"So I started out writing in other fields. I had always preferred, myself, adventure stories. Talbot Mundy, Haggard, and that type of thing, so that is what I wrote, into the early 1950s, while I was a children's librarian in my home town of Cleveland, Ohio, for twenty years, long before I moved to Florida.

"My mother was from an old Ohio pioneer family." Now she makes herself more comfortable in her chair, and she relaxes a little, as if she'd rather talk about her family than her fiction. "My mother's people got their land as bounty land. Now, you probably don't know what that means."

I admit that I don't.



"Well, the men who served in the Revolutionary War, instead of being paid off in money at the end of the war, when the country was broke, were given western lands, if they chose. The state of Ohio was largely settled by bounty-land men.

"One ancestor of hers, who had served in the Maryland line, took bounty land, and married an Indian. And this was in the 1780s. As a result of his settling there, mother had a great deal of background of early Ohio. When she reached her seventies she started to write the story of her life as a child, which was back in the 1870s. When she died, she left half of the book in her papers. I was able to finish it, to give a picture of childhood and life in a small town in farming country in Ohio in about 1878. The book was titled *Bertie and May*; mother's name was Bertha, and her sister was May.

"My mother started to read to me when I was very, very young—poetry, at first. She had learned reams of poetry. So I got a feeling for words even before I knew what they meant. By the time I was five, she was reading *Little Women* to me.

"Mother also had a fascinating library of Victorian novels, which were what got me started on writing my one nonfiction book, which, incidentally, has never been published. It is a history of five women writers in the United States who, from 1840 to 1870, were the very best sellers—they outsold all the men, being the ones that Nathaniel Hawthorne referred to as the 'Damned scribbling women,' because they sold when he didn't!

"Three of these women wrote books that are just as readable today as they were then. They knew how to plot and to tell a story. Mary-Jane Holmes, Maria Cummings, and Elizabeth Wetherall. If you want to know how the pioneer people in New York lived in about 1840, all you have to do is read Elizabeth Wetherall. She describes the daily life of the people.

"When I wrote my own Victorian novel, *Velvet Shadows*, I did intensive research into the Victorian period. The stores and the dresses that I describe existed. When I talk about a dress of gold tissue, caught up with stuffed hummingbirds with ruby eyes—well, you can imagine what the times were like. I was writing about 1870 in San Francisco; the people were new-rich, they spent money like water.

"I've always been interested in the Victorian period. My mother was a Victorian herself, and I was brought up on Victorian stories. She had books of manners and food and so forth, of that period, and it's fas-



cinating to read the customs of mourning, for example—how many months you wore your veil down, how many months before you dared throw it back or add a little bit of white to the front of your bonnet. The whole thing went through three years, and by that time somebody else had died and you started all over again. My mother said she never remembered seeing her own mother out of mourning.”

By this time, I'm beginning to realize that Andre Norton would be happy to tell me anecdotes about American ancestry for the next two hours. But I want to know more about her work; so I interrupt and ask about her first science-fiction novel.

“I used my home town of Cleveland and tried to visualize it deserted after a complete war, when people had returned to a barbaric state. That was *Starman's Son*. It has now sold well over a million copies.” She smiles.

“Of course, for many years I sold well, but I had no critical standing whatsoever. I was a woman in a man's field. There were only about four of us women and we either wrote under men's names or under our initials. We had to! This didn't make me resentful; I accepted it as part of the customs of the times. There was no women's liberation movement then.”

Does she feel that there's any general difference between male and female writing?

“Oh yes. Decidedly so. I think women are more interested in characterization than men are, and there are very few men writers who can draw a good woman.” She mentions a well-known male name as an example, but asks to keep it off the record, perhaps not wanting to cause offense. “Most of their women are stereotypes, whereas women can write about a man and make him real. I know women who do.”

She pauses, here, to cross-examine me on how many female writers will be in *Dream Makers II*. Will I be including Anne McCaffrey? C. L. Moore? Leigh Brackett? Marion Zimmer Bradley?

I explain that some of them write fantasy, which I don't enjoy.

“You class Anne McCaffrey as a fantasy writer? She is not. And she is one of the leading writers. If you leave her out, you are going to run into trouble.” She tells me this very firmly.

“Jacqueline Lichtenberg is also of importance. Her books are difficult reading, but they are interesting.”

Since most of the names that Andre Norton has mentioned have been



active in the field for many decades, I ask if there are any modern women writers whom she admires.

"Of course right now I'm very upset, in the new attitude in fantasy toward homosexuality. I feel very deeply that this is wrong. At least half of the readers of fantasy are under twenty. Some of them, who are exceptional readers, are only ten or twelve.

"There've been some very bald books involving homosexuality. One of them fell into my hands, and I was so outraged that I simply threw the book in the garbage. And that book was up for a prize. Another was sent to me, and I opened it on a sex scene that was so absolutely nauseating that it made me physically ill!

"This trend is getting stronger and stronger. For a good many years, when I was in the library, they would not buy science fiction and fantasy books, because those were considered trash, as a result of those dreadful covers on the magazines. So I fought and fought to get them on library lists.

"I have friends who teach science fiction in high school, and they have to be so careful, now, in vetting the books that they use because of this new trend, for fear of using anything that any parent could object to.

"I feel that all the work that I tried to do, to establish science fiction as a perfectly good form of reading, is being undermined."

Is she objecting, for example, to the John Norman books about warriors and slave girls?

"Well, now, I've read exactly one of those, and I thought it was a very poor imitation of Edgar Rice Burroughs. No, those are sadistic, but another book, for example"—she asks me to omit its title—"not only described a homosexual relationship, but an incestuous one, between two brothers, in the greatest detail.

"You don't have to go in for sensational material in order to write a good book. Some people are now writing books that would strike an impressionable young person in a very questionable fashion. This is an evil and dangerous thing."

She feels just as strongly about other issues—the mistreatment of animals, in particular.

"I have not too much respect for the human race, for some of the things that they have done. For example, the clubbing of the baby seals, which is the most atrocious thing. The killing of the whales. In some



states they kill animals in the humane societies by shutting off all their air in pressure chambers. It's horrible. We have fought it through the courts, in Florida, and they have outlawed it here. In fact, I wrote one book, *The Iron Cage*, because I was so angry at what was going on with animals."

And animals continue to play a large part in many of her fantasy novels. As if on cue, one of her cats wanders over, climbs up, and sniffs the microphone.

"This is Ty," Andre Norton introduces me to the cat. "She is an example of breeding for a red Abyssinian, so she's much more red than the majority of her breed. They tend to have a grayish tinge. Now, Ty, don't you get up there!"

She strokes the cat. "You know, I think the human race made a bad mistake at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. We leaped for mechanics, and threw aside things that were just as important. We made the transition too fast. I do not like mechanical things very much. And I don't like a lot of the modern ways of living. I prefer to do things with my hands; and I think everybody misses that. People need the use of their hands to feel creative.

"In England, weaving had been done in separate cottages. Then they started these factories where the conditions were so dreadful. It seems to me the principal part of the Industrial Revolution was greed.

"But now, people are turning back more and more to the earlier ideas. I myself am not a scientist; so I'm not interested in hard-science writing. Recently I have been doing quite a bit of study into the occult and the various mental discoveries that we are making. That's what interests me now.

"Wicca is one of my interests. That is witchcraft—white witchcraft, not the black Satanism which is nothing but a sort of parasite that developed in the late seventeenth century as a reaction to the church. No, Wicca goes back to the old religion that deals with herbs and moon worship. It's a woman's religion, you see, because only a woman can control it. The horned priest is under the priestess.

"I don't try to do anything with it, but I study it. I use some of their spells in my books, and some of their ceremonies, but I always alter both the spells and the ceremonies. This is necessary. I have friends who are practitioners of Wicca and they tell me it must *never* be used straight, in any book.

"The friend of mine who practices it and lives close by belongs to



the Irish Congregation of Isis, and their particular thing is helping animals in difficulty. The people who practice Wicca are strongly nature lovers. They are conservationists. They use herbs a lot. In fact, it was two members of Wicca, out West, who bred the unicorn. A real unicorn. It looks exactly like the ones in the tapestries. I even have a little sprig of the hair of the mane of one of them, that was sent to me.

"You see, the original unicorns were not horses. If you look at the ancient tapestries, they do not look like horses at all. They look like a variety of goat, and that's what has been bred, a huge white goat with the single horn, the chin-beard, the long mane, and the long tail.

"I'm also very interested in psychometry, which I have actually seen proven. In psychometry, a person holds an object and reads its history. I'm a skeptic unless I can see a thing work, but I saw this. I had three pieces of jewelry, all antique, and I gave them to a sensitive to read. The first piece I thought was Chinese, but she dated it and read it as not Chinese, because she described the man who wore it and he was distinctly Manchu rather than Chinese in his dress. Then she described the man who made it, and even the material from which it was made.

"I later showed it to a curator of Chinese jewelry, and he backed her up, in the date, the fact that it was a time when the Manchus were in power, and that there was a rebellion at that time. She had said that the man who'd owned it had been executed. So all her background was authentic, even her description of the material used in it.

"Another piece was a brooch made from mammoth ivory. To look at it, you would think it was agate. But she held that for a moment and laid it down, saying, 'I cannot stand this, there is a big animal, and it is dying, and screaming. I want nothing more to do with that.'"

We talk a bit more about magic and ESP, but it's not a subject I know much about. I'm more interested in her as a writer; so she takes me out of the living room and shows me her study.

In addition to being full of books, there are more ornaments and mementoes. Her readers send her models of the creatures and characters from her novels—finely sculpted soldiers and peasant people, dragons ingeniously fashioned from colored pipe cleaners, statuettes, drawings, clay models. There are her awards, too—a Balrog fantasy award, and other plaques and scrolls.

"I still type my own first drafts," she says, pointing to a Smith-Corona electric on a gray steel typing table, beside an old wooden desk piled high with papers. "I pay no attention to spelling or grammar; I



just want to get the idea on the paper. I find nowadays that if I try to work from an outline, that kills it. So when I write, now, I do not know, from one page to another, what's going to happen or who's going to turn up.

"I used to type the second and third drafts myself, but I've had some back trouble lately, so I correct the first draft in ballpoint, then turn that over to my typist. She does a second draft, and I go over it again. Then she does the final draft."

She leads me through a door into what used to be the garage. She never travels, and dislikes even leaving the house more than necessary. So she owns no car, and the garage has been turned into a library. There are endless shelves of books on history, myth, and legend. There are large sections of Chinese and Japanese literature, in which she has a special interest. Everything is meticulously arranged by subject. But of course; for twenty years she was a librarian.

I suddenly realize how appropriate it is that she put her library in the disused garage. The books, after all, are her alternate means of travel. This polite, eloquent lady may seem isolated here in Florida, in a retreat from the world; but with the books, she can go anywhere. They are her tickets to adventure, to lands limited only by the imagination.

Note: Several paragraphs in this profile were deleted or modified at the request of Andre Norton.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Many of Andre Norton's novels are interconnected with continuing characters and shared backgrounds, but the *Witch World* series stands apart and remains possibly her most popular work, consisting of ten books, from *Witch World* (1963) to *Trey of Swords* (1978). The scenario involves a number of elements, such as the use of magic, which earn the books a "fantasy" label, though they are sword-and-sorcery in the usual sense.

Andre Norton's first novel, *Starman's Son* (1952), is set in a post-holocaust Cleveland that has devolved into warring clans, subsequently united by a mutant hero to fight a common monstrous enemy. Over the many years and through the many novels that she has written since this early work, she has turned increasingly to female protagonists, often aided on an equal basis by telepathic animals, especially cats, in adventures on very far-off planets or worlds that exist only in the imagination.

Though she is regarded as a writer of children's stories, Andre Norton's various series are tailored for differing age groups, and frequently make satisfying adult reading.